

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

ANTHONY GEORGE BELL,

Plaintiff,

-against-

NEW YORK LEGAL ASSISTANCE GROUP;  
LISA RIVERA OF NYLAG; MR. ROMO OF  
NYLAG,

Defendants.

24-CV-2434 (LTS)

ORDER OF DISMISSAL  
WITH LEAVE TO REPLEAD

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN, Chief United States District Judge:

Plaintiff, who is appearing *pro se*, brings this action invoking the court’s federal question jurisdiction, alleging that Defendants violated his rights. He sues the New York Legal Assistance Group (“NYLAG”), NYLAG President and Chief Executive Officer Lisa Rivera, and NYLAG attorney Mr. Romo. By order dated April 12, 2024, the Court granted Plaintiff’s request to proceed *in forma pauperis* (“IFP”), that is, without prepayment of fees. For the reasons set forth below, the Court dismisses the complaint, but grants Plaintiff 30 days’ leave to replead his claims in an amended complaint.

**STANDARD OF REVIEW**

The Court must dismiss an IFP complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B); *see Livingston v. Adirondack Beverage Co.*, 141 F.3d 434, 437 (2d Cir. 1998). The Court must also dismiss a complaint when the Court lacks subject matter jurisdiction of the claims raised. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3).

While the law mandates dismissal on any of these grounds, the Court is obliged to construe *pro se* pleadings liberally, *Harris v. Mills*, 572 F.3d 66, 72 (2d Cir. 2009), and interpret them to raise the “strongest [claims] that they *suggest*,” *Triestman v. Fed. Bureau of Prisons*, 470 F.3d 471, 474 (2d Cir. 2006) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (emphasis in original). But the “special solicitude” in *pro se* cases, *id.* at 475 (citation omitted), has its limits – to state a claim, *pro se* pleadings still must comply with Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which requires a complaint to make a short and plain statement showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.

Rule 8 requires a complaint to include enough facts to state a claim for relief “that is plausible on its face.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). A claim is facially plausible if the plaintiff pleads enough factual detail to allow the Court to draw the inference that the defendant is liable for the alleged misconduct. In reviewing the complaint, the Court must accept all well-pleaded factual allegations as true. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009). But it does not have to accept as true “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action,” which are essentially just legal conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555. After separating legal conclusions from well-pleaded factual allegations, the Court must determine whether those facts make it plausible – not merely possible – that the pleader is entitled to relief. *Id.*

### **BACKGROUND**

Plaintiff brings his claims using the court’s general complaint form. He checks the box on the form to invoke the court’s federal question jurisdiction. In response to the question asking which of his federal constitutional or federal statutory rights have been violated, Plaintiff writes, “They said they were going to give me legal advice on my case against the city but put me on

hold to help illegal immigrants which cost me my case against the City of New York.” (ECF 1, at 2.)<sup>1</sup>

Plaintiff states that the events giving rise to his claims occurred in Brooklyn, New York, in November of 2023. He alleges,

They were supposed to be advising me on my case. I had to have the paperwork to my case back in time. I tried for weeks to get them no response then 1 weeks before I was to turn it in they told me or Mr. Romo emailed me and said they won’t be helping me for ten months because they had more important things to do[,] which was to help im[m]igrants.”

(*Id.* at 5.) Plaintiff states that, as a result, he “lost [his] case. (*Id.* at 6.)

Plaintiff seeks \$5 million in damages, which is “1/10” of the amount for which he was suing the City of New York. (*Id.*)

### DISCUSSION

The subject matter jurisdiction of the federal district courts is limited and is set forth generally in 28 U.S.C. §§ 1331 and 1332. Under these statutes, a federal district court has jurisdiction only when a “federal question” is presented or when plaintiff and defendant are citizens of different states and the amount in controversy exceeds the sum or value of \$75,000. “[I]t is common ground that in our federal system of limited jurisdiction any party or the court *sua sponte*, at any stage of the proceedings, may raise the question of whether the court has subject matter jurisdiction.” *United Food & Com. Workers Union, Loc. 919, AFL-CIO v. CenterMark Prop. Meriden Square, Inc.*, 30 F.3d 298, 301 (2d Cir. 1994) (quoting *Manway Constr. Co., Inc. v. Hous. Auth. of the City of Hartford*, 711 F.2d 501, 503 (2d Cir. 1983)); *see* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3) (“If the court determines at any time that it lacks subject-matter

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<sup>1</sup> Plaintiff writes using irregular capitalization. For readability, the Court uses standard capitalization when quoting from the complaint. All other spelling, grammar, and punctuation are as in the original unless otherwise indicated.

jurisdiction, the court must dismiss the action.”); *Ruhrgas AG v. Marathon Oil Co.*, 526 U.S. 574, 583 (1999) (“[S]ubject-matter delineations must be policed by the courts on their own initiative.”).

#### A. Federal Question Jurisdiction

To invoke federal question jurisdiction, a plaintiff’s claims must arise “under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States.” 28 U.S.C. § 1331. A case arises under federal law if the complaint “establishes either that federal law creates the cause of action or that the plaintiff’s right to relief necessarily depends on resolution of a substantial question of federal law.” *Bay Shore Union Free Sch. Dist. v. Kain*, 485 F.3d 730, 734-35 (2d Cir. 2007) (quoting *Empire Healthchoice Assur., Inc. v. McVeigh*, 547 U.S. 677, 690 (2006)). Mere invocation of federal jurisdiction, without any facts demonstrating a federal law claim, does not create federal subject matter jurisdiction. *See Nowak v. Ironworkers Loc. 6 Pension Fund*, 81 F.3d 1182, 1188-89 (2d Cir. 1996).

Here, Plaintiff invokes the court’s federal question jurisdiction, but his allegations do not suggest a viable cause of action under federal law.<sup>2</sup> Plaintiff’s allegations instead suggest that he

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<sup>2</sup> To the extent Plaintiff is seeking to assert constitutional claims against Defendants under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, his allegations do not suggest a viable claim. A claim for relief under Section 1983 must allege facts showing that each defendant acted under the color of a state “statute, ordinance, regulation, custom or usage.” 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Private parties therefore generally are not liable under the statute. *Sykes v. Bank of Am.*, 723 F.3d 399, 406 (2d Cir. 2013) (citing *Brentwood Acad. v. Tenn. Secondary Sch. Athletic Ass’n*, 531 U.S. 288, 295 (2001)). Moreover, absent special circumstances suggesting concerted action between an attorney and a state representative, *see Nicholas v. Goord*, 430 F.3d 652, 656 n.7 (2d Cir. 2005) (citing *Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co.*, 398 U.S. 144, 152 (1970)), the representation of a defendant by private counsel in state proceedings does not constitute the degree of state involvement or interference necessary to establish a claim under Section 1983, regardless of whether that attorney is privately retained, court-appointed, or employed as a public defender. *See Bourdon v. Loughren*, 386 F.3d 88, 90 (2d Cir. 2004) (citing *Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 324-25 (1981)); *see also Schnabel v. Abramson*, 232 F.3d 83, 87 (2d Cir. 2000) (holding that legal aid organization

is attempting to assert claims of legal malpractice, which arise under state, not federal, law. The Court therefore lacks federal question jurisdiction of this action.

## **B. Diversity of Citizenship Jurisdiction**

In order to bring a state law claim in federal court, Plaintiff would have to allege facts demonstrating that the Court has diversity of citizenship jurisdiction of this action. To establish diversity jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1332, a plaintiff must first allege that the plaintiff and the defendant are citizens of different states. *Wis. Dep't of Corr. v. Schacht*, 524 U.S. 381, 388 (1998). For purposes of diversity jurisdiction, a corporation is a citizen of both the State where it is incorporated and the State where it has its principal place of business. *Hertz Corp. v. Friend*, 559 U.S. 77, 93 (2010). “An individual’s citizenship, within the meaning of the diversity statute, is determined by his domicile.” *Johnson v. Smithsonian*, 4 F. App’x 69, 70 (2d Cir. 2001) (citing *Palazzo v. Corio*, 232 F.3d 88, 42 (2d Cir. 2000)). Domicile is “the place where a person has his true fixed home and principal establishment, and to which, whenever he is absent, he has the intention of returning.” *Linardos*, 157 F.3d at 948. In addition, the plaintiff must allege to a “reasonable probability” that the claim is in excess of the sum or value of \$75,000.00, the statutory jurisdictional amount. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a); *Colavito v. N.Y. Organ Donor Network, Inc.*, 438 F.3d 214, 221 (2d Cir. 2006) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

Here, Plaintiff has not alleged facts demonstrating diversity of citizenship between the parties. Plaintiff alleges that he is a resident of the State of New York. Plaintiff does not allege where NYLAG is incorporated or the state in which it maintains its headquarters. Nor does Plaintiff allege the residential addresses of the individual NYLAG employees; he instead lists

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ordinarily is not a state actor for purposes of Section 1983). NYLAG and its employees are private actors, who are not alleged to be employed by any state or local government.

only their New York, New York employment address. Because Plaintiff has not alleged that the parties are citizens of different states, the Court lacks diversity of citizenship jurisdiction of his claims.<sup>3</sup>

The Court grants Plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint alleging facts demonstrating that the Court has diversity of citizenship jurisdiction of this action. If Plaintiff files an amended complaint, he must allege facts demonstrating that he and all defendants are citizens of different states and that his claims are worth in excess of the \$75,000 jurisdictional threshold.

### **LEAVE TO AMEND GRANTED**

Plaintiff proceeds in this matter without the benefit of an attorney. District courts generally should grant a self-represented plaintiff an opportunity to amend a complaint to cure its defects, unless amendment would be futile. *See Hill v. Curcione*, 657 F.3d 116, 123-24 (2d Cir. 2011); *Salahuddin v. Cuomo*, 861 F.2d 40, 42 (2d Cir. 1988). Indeed, the Second Circuit has cautioned that district courts “should not dismiss [a *pro se* complaint] without granting leave to amend at least once when a liberal reading of the complaint gives any indication that a valid claim might be stated.” *Cuoco v. Moritsugu*, 222 F.3d 99, 112 (2d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Gomez v. USAA Fed. Sav. Bank*, 171 F.3d 794, 795 (2d Cir. 1999)). Because Plaintiff may be able to allege additional facts to demonstrate that the Court has diversity of citizenship jurisdiction of his claims, the Court grants Plaintiff 30 days’ leave to amend his complaint to detail his claims.

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<sup>3</sup> The Court assumes, for the purposes of this order only, that Plaintiff’s claims are worth in excess of the \$75,000 jurisdictional minimum based on his assertion that he is seeking \$5 million, which he asserts is a fraction of what he was seeking in the case he was unable to bring due to Defendants’ failure to advise him. If Plaintiff files an amended complaint, he should allege facts in support of the asserted value of his claims.

If Plaintiff does not file an amended complaint within the time allowed, the Court will direct the Clerk of Court to enter judgment in this action.

### CONCLUSION

Plaintiff's complaint, filed IFP under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1), is dismissed for lack of subject matter jurisdiction, *see* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3), with 30 days' leave to replead. If Plaintiff does not file an amended complaint within the time allowed, the Court will direct the Clerk of Court to enter judgment in this action.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore IFP status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *See Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962).

The Court directs the Clerk of Court to hold this matter open on the docket until a civil judgment is entered.

SO ORDERED.

Dated: April 29, 2024  
New York, New York

/s/ Laura Taylor Swain  
LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN  
Chief United States District Judge